

Sturgeon and King Mountain Conservation Easement *Draft Resource Management Plan*

INTRODUCTION

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on 1,957 acres (the Land), in two discrete parcels, approximately 4 miles north of Drummond MT. This draft management plan discloses FWP's management intent for public review and comment, and for documenting existing information for future reference. This document conveys interim management policies and strategies for the property while the long term and supplemental management plans are developed.

Goals:

- Permanently protect important native wildlife habitat;
- Provide perpetual public hunting access to the Land;
- Contribute to the overall function, integrity, and management of adjacent private, DNRC, and Bureau of Land Management lands;
- Maintain the Land as working forest and range.

Detailed vegetative inventories and a forest management plan has been completed for the proposed conservation easement land (Northwest Management, Inc., 2011; available upon request at the MFWP Region 2 Headquarters). A baseline inventory of broader vegetative condition, roads, utilities, improvements, etc. will be completed in 2012.

ACQUISITION DATE

FWP plans to acquire the Conservation Easement from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in December, 2011, pending public review and approval.

CHAIN OF OWNERSHIP

The Land was purchased from Plum Creek Timber Company by The Nature Conservancy in 2004 as part of a larger 89,000 conservation initiative (The Blackfoot Community Project). The Land has been owned and managed by TNC since that time. Following MFWP's purchase of the conservation easement the Land will be sold to private (likely adjacent) landowners. Management of the Land by subsequent owners would be subject to the terms of the Conservation Easement and appended Resource Management Plans.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

Location:

The Land lies about 4-6 miles north of Drummond, MT on or adjacent to Sturgeon and King Mtns. at the head of Bear and Sturgeon Creeks (Fig 1).

Acreage Subject to Conservation Easement:

Subject lands occur in two distinct parcels totaling 1,957 acres.

Township 11 North, Range 12 West, P.P.M.:

Section 8: All that portion lying within Powell County

Section 9: All that portion lying within Powell County

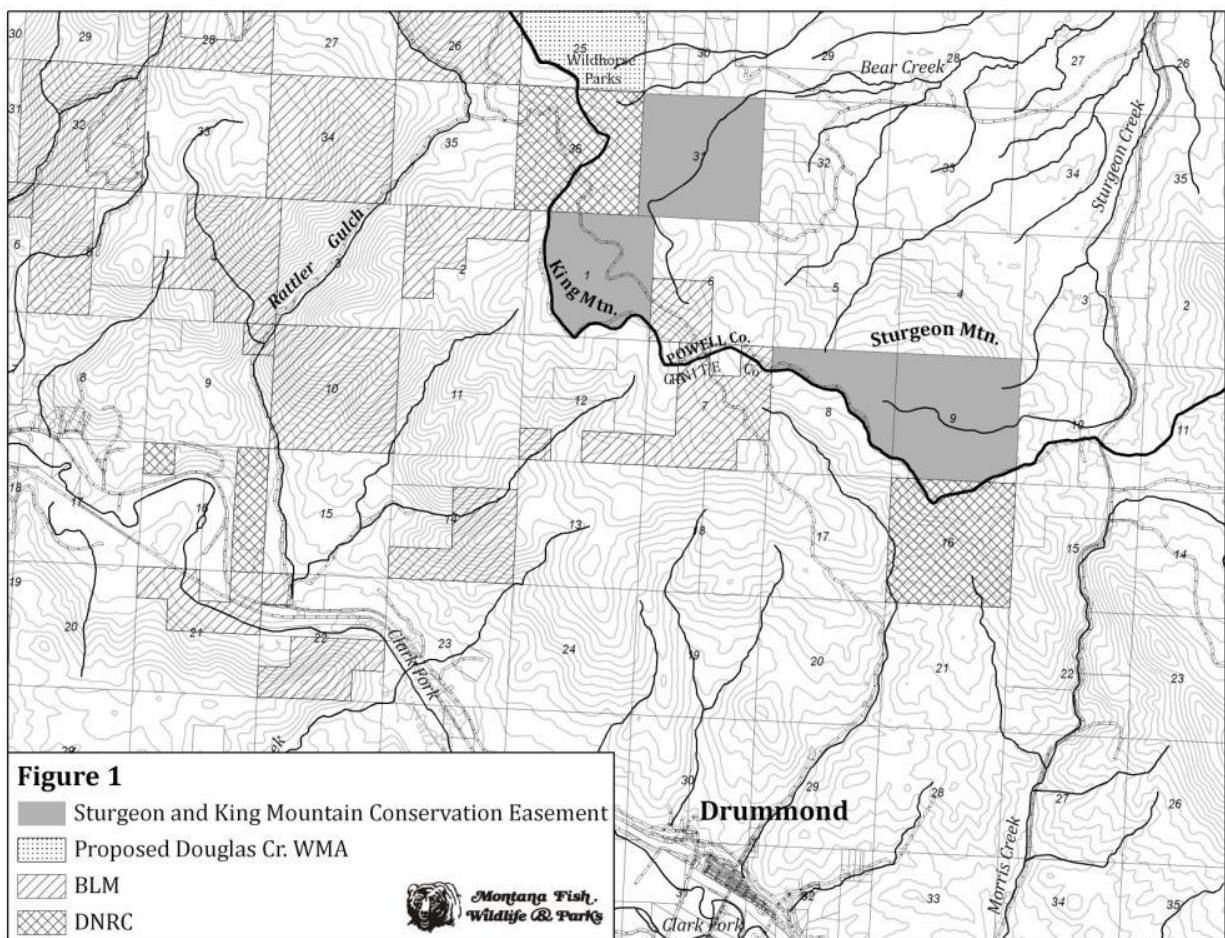
Township 11 North, Range 13 West, P.P.M.

Section 1: Govt. Lots 1-3, SE1/4 NW1/4, S1/2NE1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, N1/2SE1/4, AND portions of W1/2W1/2 & S1/2S1/2 lying within Powell County.

Township 12 North, Range 12 West, P.P.M.:

Section 31: Govt. Lots 1-4, E1/2W1/2, E1/2

Figure 1.



LANDFORMS AND DRAINAGE

The subject land lies at the headwaters of Bear and Sturgeon Creeks, within the Blackfoot River watershed. The Land lies primarily on the flanks of both King and Sturgeon Mountains in the Garnet Mountain Range. Elevations range from 5,000 – 6,500 feet; slope and aspect varies.

VEGETATION

The subject lands are almost completely forested (Figure 2). The most abundant conifer tree species on the property is Douglas-fir. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine are common while western larch and Englemann spruce occur more rarely. Aspen is the primary deciduous tree species present. Sites are generally dry and timber productivity and regeneration is moderate.

The forest understory vegetation includes common snowberry, pinegrass, elk sedge, heartleaf arnica, white spirea, kinnikinnick, Oregon grape, serviceberry, and twinflower. Common forest habitat types are Douglas fir/snowberry, Douglas fir/twinflower, and Douglas fir/ pine grass.

Figure 2.



Most forest stands have been previously managed for industrial timber production. Timber harvest has significantly decreased the abundance of large diameter ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Forest stands generally have overstories of Douglas fir with understories of sapling, seedling and pole-sized Douglas-fir on moist aspects and grass on drier aspects. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine regeneration is present but not abundant in most areas.

Bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue, arrowleaf balsamroot and Idaho fescue are present on dry aspects and in forest openings. Fire suppression over the last 80 years has likely reduced the overall grassland acreage.

Riparian corridors are present but not extensive on the subject property; the most significant riparian corridor lies along Bear Cr. in Section 31. These areas, when present, are dominated by alder/sedge communities.

No Montana State listed Plant Species of Concern are known to occur on the property.

Several species of noxious weeds occur throughout the property at various levels of infestation. Weeds are most prevalent on roadsides and on drier aspects with grassy understories and sparse forest canopy cover. The most prevalent weed species include; cheatgrass, spotted knapweed, hound's tongue, and thistles.

A detailed inventory of the Land's vegetation types, stand locations and descriptions, current vegetative condition, weed management needs, forest insect and disease, and management prescriptions has been completed (Northwest Management, Inc., 2011) and is on file with the landowner and at the MFWP Region 2 Headquarters.

WILDLIFE HABITAT

The Land provides important summer and fall/transitional range for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. Elk, mule deer, and moose may use portions of the property during winter at times and during years when snowpack is less limiting. A portion of the East Garnet elk herd annually migrates out of the Helmville Valley to winter on the open faces between Bearmouth and Drummond. The subject lands lie within this migratory corridor.

The Land provides important habitat for other big game species including moose, black bear, wolf, and mountain lion. Bobcat, pine marten, mountain grouse, raptors, and dozens of passerine bird species are also common.

The Land does not include high quality Canada lynx habitat nor would production of lynx habitat be a reasonable management objective. That said, one of the southernmost, naturally occurring populations of Canada lynx in the American west occurs adjacent to project lands (in the higher elevation areas of the Garnet mountains) and the Land contributes to the function of a putative north/south movement corridor.

Grizzly bear presence on and around the subject property has increased in recent years as the southern extent of the bear's range continues to expand. Today, grizzly sightings on or near the subject land are common.

The property does not, and will not, support important native fish habitat.

IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT

Forest roads are the primary improvement on the property. Their condition varies widely from relatively poor to high-standard. A detailed spatial and qualitative inventory of roads on the property will occur during the development of the Baseline inventory in 2012. Road maps and photopoints are also included in the Forest Stewardship Plan.

Some cattle fencing is present; its condition varies. Existing fence will be mapped as during the Baseline inventory and considered if/when supplemental Grazing Management Plans are developed.

MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Management of the Land would be largely at the discretion of the landowner except that management actions must comply with the agreed terms of the Conservation Easement. The Conservation Easement restricts or guides several significant land management activities:

Subdivision and Development

The landowner may not construct permanent structures on the Land without prior approval from MFWP. The land may not be subdivided, except that fee title to Section 1 may be sold separately from the remainder of the land, and the remaining portion of the Land may be split (conveyed to separate owners) one additional time. Also, any transfer of land to a public agency would not count as a subdivision for the purposes of the Conservation Easement. The result of these restrictions is that the 1,917 acres subject to the conservation easement may not be held in more than 3 separate private ownerships.

Utility and energy generation improvements, habitat improvement activities, and road building may occur with Prior Approval of MFWP.

Forest Management

The landowner retains the right, and is in fact encouraged, to actively manage forested habitat on the property consistent with the Conservation Easement's stated conservation values and the Forest Stewardship Plan. Any management activity that produces material sold or otherwise transferred off the property requires prior MFWP notice and approval to ensure compliance with the easement and Forest Stewardship Plan. The landowner will prepare a Forest Management Plan describing the anticipated activity for MFWP review and approval.

The Forest Stewardship Plan provides detailed descriptions of current forest types, stand condition, and management recommendations. We anticipate updating the Forest Stewardship Plan periodically and in collaboration with the landowner to account for forest succession and other significant changes to existing forest stand condition.

Grazing Management

The landowner(s) may graze livestock on the property with MFWP's Prior Approval and following a MFWP-approved Grazing Management Plan. If and when the landowner(s) wishes to graze livestock on the property, a Plan will be developed cooperatively with MFWP and appended to the Resource Management Plan; an example of Standards for Grazing Livestock are included as Exhibit C of the Conservation Easement.

Public Recreational Access

The Conservation Easement requires that the landowner(s) provide recreational hunting access during seasons and for species (and sexes of species) legal to hunt under that year's Commission-adopted regulations. The conservation easement does *not* require the landowner to grant access by any but non-motorized, non-mechanical means. The landowner(s) must allow public hunters to enter the land during open hunting seasons but only from adjacent public lands or publically-accessible roads. The landowner may choose to allow individuals motorized access to the property and may deny access to anyone who is not conducting, or has not in the past conducted, herself or himself in a prudent, responsible, and safe manner.

MFWP will work with landowner(s) subsequent to TNC to develop a Recreation Access Plan to help manage public use of the property. This Plan may direct the designation of parking areas, posting signs, developing and maintaining road closure structures, etc.

MFWP will contribute material and manpower toward the development and implementation of these Recreation Access Plans.

Other Restricted Activities

The landowner may not, without Prior Approval or as otherwise provided for in the Conservation Easement, significantly manipulate native vegetation; transfer, sell, or lease water rights; degrade wetland or riparian areas; conduct exploratory or extractive surface mining; operate a feed lot; install utilities; construct permanent structures; introduce non-native plants; operate an alternative livestock ranch, fur farm, shooting preserve, zoo, or other facility that holds or propagates native or non-native animals; rent or lease the land for recreational purpose (including outfitting) or charging trespass fees; use the land for commercial or industrial use apart from forest management and livestock grazing.

Noxious Weed Management

The Forest Stewardship Plan provides basic information on the distribution and treatment of weeds on the property. The landowner is responsible for control of noxious weeds on their land.